Key points from Renzetti & Curran, chapter 2

The process of sex differentiation in the womb is complicated and involves interaction between chromosomes and hormones. Most people have the same (male or female) chromosomal sex, hormonal sex, gonadal sex, and genital sex. But some people don’t.

Genital ambiguity is often “corrected” at birth because it threatens our culture’s dichotomous sex system.

Brain organization and hormones are both offered as reasons why men and women are different. However, the evidence for various claims along these lines is mixed.

Lynda Birke calls for a “transformative account of gender development,” which “recognizes the truly interactive nature of biology and environment as well as individual agency in the creation of gender by examining how culture and individual behavior may impact biology and physiology and vice versa.” (p. 53)

Some possible interactions from the chapter:

• Negative attitudes about menstruation may influence women’s experience of PMS symptoms (and studies of it).

• Individuals with chromosomal abnormalities may become “more masculine” or “more feminine” because their parents socialize them differently to compensate for the abnormalities.

• Gender socialization may produce different skills in men and women (e.g., expression of emotion, verbal vs. spatial skills) that are then reflected in brain organization.

• Interest in biological differences between men and women may rise during times when social differences appear to be eroding.
The Social Construction of Sex

The process of constructing reality (the world of meaning) consists of categorizing, naming and typifying.

A social construction of gender approach focuses on typifying—characterizing how men and women are different. It assumes that the categories of “male” and “female” are found in the physical world.

A social construction of sex approach examines the process of categorizing people into the categories of “male” and “female.” Two types of evidence challenge the privileged status of this construction.

1. The existence of intersexuals, people born with ambiguous genitals. This evidence is often erased by surgery

2. The ways people categorize sex—and how they deal with intersexuals—vary by culture (see chapter 3).